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ABSTRACT

Several factors influence learning as it occurs in the workplace and in other settings where learning is undertaken for the expressed purpose of acquiring or improving competencies that will be used in the workplace. Over the past decade, the nature of the workplace has changed, and workers must continually strive to learn in order to keep up with the demands. Because taking time off for training is often too costly, learning must be integrated into all aspects of the job. Although in earlier times workers received training in school and then performed on the job for many years, the rapid pace of change in work today necessitates that workers continue to acquire new knowledge and skills on the job. Although traditional employer-developed workplace education programs have been cumbersome, such concepts as reflective practice, action learning, self-directed learning, and learning organizations are becoming increasingly important in the workplace and, in some cases, are replacing the traditional notions of instructional design and training. All of these learning processes have a substantial component of learner initiative and control. In addition, workers come together to solve common problems in a process of action learning. Workplace learning is not time or place bound. Workers learn what they need to know when they need to know it, and formalized training programs are deemphasized in favor of an atmosphere in which learning is pervasive, natural, and informal. External factors that affect workplace learning include economic trends, social trends, and technological advancement. For example, economic downturns may lead to unemployment and cuts in training budgets. New electronic innovations allow work to be performed at a variety of locations at times around the clock. These innovations also affect work-related learning, and they will continue to affect adult learning into the next century. (Contains 13 references.) (KC)

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Consideration of Selected Influences on Work Place Learning

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In this paper we discuss several factors that influence learning as it occurs in the work place and in other settings where learning is undertaken for the expressed purpose of acquiring or improving competencies which will be utilized in the work place. We have organized our discussion with five primary considerations in mind. First, we discuss current conditions in the work place that influence the demand for, and timing of, work-related learning. We then consider where work-related learning takes place, who controls it, and why. Next, we discuss the extent to which learning is viewed, and undertaken, as an individual our group activity. We then consider the extent to which the products of learning are utilized individually, in groups, or in teams. Finally, we consider how economic and social trends, and technological advancements appear to affect work place learning. Although it is immediately clear that all these considerations are interdependent, we address them separately, to the extent possible, for the sake of clarity.

Conditions in the Work Place That Influence the Demand for, and Timing of, Work-Related Learning.

Over the period of the last decade the very nature of the work place has changed. Personal communications, the movement of information, and technological enhancements to even the simplest of processes have made it necessary for employees to be continuously learning some new dimension of their job. The specificity of competencies required to meet ever changing standards and enhanced processes has made it virtually impossible for workers to maintain competence without ongoing opportunities to learn while doing the job. The notion that a person could be adequately trained prior to entering the work force and then be expected to continue to practice at satisfactory levels without further development for an extended period of time simply has no place in the current work place. Even the practice of moving workers "off-line" for periods of training in order to prepare them to cope with new work expectations is too time consuming and expensive to be useful in many present day situations.

What has evolved is a need for work place environments that integrate learning with every aspect of daily activity. Learning, in all its forms, must be seen as central to all tasks and hold a priority on a par with task accomplishment. In the remainder of this paper we will consider issues directly related to the conditions noted above.

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Where Work-Related Learning Takes Place, Who Controls it, and Why?

Historically, the first phase of work-related learning has been entrusted to our system of formal education and may be thought of as pre-employment general education. Among the myriad purposes of formal education there is usually an intention to prepare young people to assume roles as productive workers in the socio-economic order. From the perspective of the 1990's, it is interesting to note that until about 1960 American education seems to have had fairly clear tracks for the preparation of students who aspired to enter the work force upon completion of secondary school and those who aspired to enter institutions of higher education. Indeed, both employers and universities depended so heavily on the two track system of public education that it was nearly impossible for a person to move from one track to the other after entering secondary school. Those who learned a trade in high school were seldom expected to develop learning skills beyond those required for the trades. If a given trade was obviated by technological advancement, skilled workers often found themselves unemployed and unemployable because of this limitation. Conversely, those who sought to continue their education into college seldom learned a "useful skill." The term "college man" (in the context of the period "college person" would have conveyed no meaning) was often used to disparage newly hired, college educated men, who for all their ability to philosophize, had no practical knowledge. Such employees might be expected to use their education to advantage as they learned from experience, but they could not be expected to function as skilled managers until they had worked for some period after college.

Once our educational system absorbed the shock of the industrial revolution, the competencies needed for success in the work place remained relatively stable for over a century. During this period it was possible to train some people in the skills of fairly narrow and common occupations. Once learned, these skills remained relevant for extended periods of time. Other individuals might be developed, by liberal education, to cope with the dynamics of management, but even these skills remained relatively stable for long periods of time. With the onset of the technological revolution the competencies needed for success in the work place began to change so rapidly that employers could no longer wait for the formal system of pre-employment education to produce competent workers. All too often employers now find that neither those who enter the work force upon completion of specific pre-employment training nor those who enter the work force upon completion of higher learning programs possess the specific technical skills or the learning skills needed by their employers. An ever growing proportion of relevant work skills must be developed after the individual is employed so that skills constellations can be made to conform to the employer's needs.

Many educators continue to struggle with the tension between pre-employment education as a source of workers who possess specific work skills and as a source of workers who are disposed toward continuous work-related learning. However, employers have clearly concluded that work-related learning must support rapid changes in the competencies needed to accomplish the mission. More than that, it must continuously anticipate changes and respond in ways that ensure the work force is prepared to meet new demands as they occur. As a consequence, employers have begun to concentrate on learning that is undertaken during the period of employment.

If work-related learning must take place during the period of productive employment and require as little "off-line" time as possible, where does it take place and who controls it? Historically, employers have controlled work-related learning. They have conducted job task analyses, defined the array of competencies and levels of competence required for each position, developed the curriculum for training, and set the standards for evaluation. These processes have always been time consuming and have often failed to produce a competent work force in a timely fashion. The more complex circumstances and shorter "turn-around" times that drive the work place today demand more effective and quicker models to ensure that the work force stays ahead, or at least keeps up with, the need for new knowledge and skills.

How is Work Place Learning Undertaken and How is it utilized?

Concepts like reflective practice, action learning, self-directed learning, and learning organizations are becoming increasingly important in the workplace and, in some cases, are replacing the traditional notions of instructional design and training. Each of these concepts makes a unique contribution to a new understanding of the nature of learning. What they all have in common is a substantial component of learner initiative and control. Schon (1987) explains that reflective practice requires the individual to consider the effectiveness and consequences of actions taken during work. The goal is to identify what is going well and what needs improvement. The reflective practitioner constantly asks: "Is there a better way?" "In what areas do I feel my knowledge or skill should be improved?" To be sure, feedback from others is taken seriously, but it is this practice of reflection, followed by action to improve practice, that shifts the responsibility for work place learning to the individual in ways that were unheard of until recently. In this environment, supervisors are encouraged to view themselves as coaches or mentors.

Action learning takes this process one step further as workers come together to solve common problems. Revans (1980) notes the task in action learning requires that individuals look at old problems in new ways. Thus, engaging in action learning requires reflective practice--ideally, individuals come to the process having thought about, and critically reflected on, their actions, the consequences of their actions, and possible solutions. The defining characteristic of action learning, then, is the combining of the reflective practice of the individual with the action learning process of the group.

Long (1993) points out that there is more than one common definition of self-directed learning. For our purposes, we emphasize two commonly held beliefs about this construct. First, self-directed learning is not the opposite of other-directed learning. Rather, it is an activity in which the learner takes an active role, in concert with trusted resource people, in determining the extent to which external support for his or her learning projects is likely to be productive. Second, individual readiness to participate in self-direction is contingent upon possessing a constellation of self-perceptions including accurate assessments of basic learning skills, and motivational factors such as desire to learn, initiative, resourcefulness, and persistence (Confessore & Confessore, 1994). When these two conditions are met, self-directed learning becomes a natural, pervasive, productive, and measurable way of setting and accomplishing learning goals that have value to both the individual and the employer.

Self-directed learning is a common vehicle for engaging learning throughout the lifespan. As such it is important to consider the individual's learner orientation as it affects one's reasons for undertaking learning projects (Houle, 1961). Several studies, conducted over a span of 35 years, reveal that active members of the work force tend to exhibit goal-orientation as learners (Confessore & Barron, In press; Cross, Valley, et al., 1974; Houle, 1961; Johnstone & Rivera, 1965). Most often the espoused goal of work place learners is to improve their work performance, earn respect and promotions, and to change with the needs of their employer.

Self-directed learning is linked to learning organizations. The behaviors identified as key in these organizations are very similar to behaviors displayed in self-directed learning: openness to alternatives; ability to make connections between seemingly disparate issues, topics and information; creativity, including flexibility and a willingness to take risks; and personal efficacy. The capacity of a learning organization to adapt quickly and effectively is directly dependent upon how well employees learn (McGill, Slocum, & Lei, 1992). Several definitions are used for the term "learning organization." Senge (1990) uses a systems approach to characterize it, and includes key capabilities such as double loop learning, managing mental models, and holistic thinking. All contribute to an organization's ability to generate new solutions to problems, and to see the world in different, and hopefully, more efficacious ways. Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) maintain that, while knowledge is created only by individuals, organizational knowledge creation is a process that "organizationally amplifies" this knowledge through dialogue, discussion, and experience sharing. Within the learning organization, knowledge is owned by everyone. In fact, a key component of any learning organization is the open sharing of information and an understanding that everyone contributes to the knowledge base of the company. Within this context, learning is an underlying goal of all activity within the organization: it is a constant and consistent behavior for all employees and managers.

These premises articulated here: self-directed learning, action learning, reflective practice and learning organizations, demonstrate that work place learning is not time or place bound. Employees learn what they need to know when they need to know it. This means that formalized training programs, while they may still have a place within the learning organization, are de-emphasized in favor of an "atmosphere of learning," where learning is pervasive, natural, and informal.

Some External Factors That Appear to Affect Work Place Learning?

While a sound argument could me made that we cannot fully understand the complex forces that affect work place learning, we believe consideration of three factors provides substantial insight into the challenges that face us. These factors are economic trends, social trends, and technological advancement. Once again, we must admit that these factors are clearly interrelated and we consider them separately, to the extent possible, for the sake of clarity.

Historically, economic trends have affected work place learning in fascinating, though often destructive, ways. Consider the contradictions inherent in the following common assumptions about the economic/work cycle: (1) The economy begins to slow and sales drop off. (2) Employers must deliver better quality services or products in order to remain competitive in a

shrinking market. (3) Because the present system cannot retrain personnel quickly enough to meet this need, the decision is made to reduce, rather than retrain, the work force. Simultaneously, the training budget is reduced. (4) In order to qualify for new jobs, or to become more competitive in their chosen field, employees seek work-related learning through traditional institutions outside the work place. (5) As the economy enters a recovery phase, employers again seek to expand the work force. Workers who have not sought work-related learning outside the system, have no new skills to offer. Those who have engaged in learning, often do not have the specific competencies required in their new work situation. (6) Employers re-establish traditional training activities in an attempt to correct this problem, but the system often fails to have the desired affect.

There are at least two critical flaws in this approach to work place learning. First, it is reactive rather than proactive. So long as we remain in a reactive mode there is little likelihood we will create a work-related learning environment that will enhance our capacity to cope with the rapid changes we now experience in the work place. Second, it relies upon employer controlled learning. This is simply at odds with the facts. For example, 80% of work-related learning occurs informally on the job (Baskett, 1993), and respondents with work experience report self-initiated learning projects more frequently than do those without work experience (77.7% vs. 53.9%) (Confessore & Confessore, 1994). We also know that workers undergoing "downsizing" report undertaking fewer work-related learning projects than do workers in organizations not experiencing downsizing (Confessore & Bonner, In press).

Consider for a moment our social identity as it relates to our work. For example, what is your first thought when asked, "Who are you?" Did you think of your name, or of your job title? Did you think of some life role you fulfill, and is that just an alternative expression of job title? Are some jobs of greater social value than others? What is the relationship between the social value and the economic value of work? Is there a social and/or economic obligation to contribute through work? Would you work if you didn't have to? What would you do if you didn't have to work? When you work, do you care about the quality of the product or service you produce? Do you desire to achieve excellence in the quality of your work? If you do, how do you assess yourself and what do you do about your findings?

All these questions, and many more that can be immediately inferred, must be continuously asked by all members of the work force. They must be asked from the perspective of the individual and from that of the group. Consider the role that work plays in our social structure. At risk of over-simplifying, we once again focus on only a few aspects of this issue. Perhaps the most critical questions affecting work-related learning have to do with our view of the fundamental nature of human kind. Do we believe that people, left to their own devices, are basically good, neutral, or bad? Do we believe people can change, that is, once a presumably fair judgment has been made about an individual's "goodness," should we ever again reconsider the issue? What is our time-orientation? Is there anything in the past that can help us deal with our present or our future? Do projections of the future productively inform our present?

The answers to such questions provide a cultural backdrop for understanding ourselves as individuals and as members of our greater society. They have differed with time and place and have defined major eras in the human experience. To be sure, they cannot go unanswered as we

focus on the roles work and work-related learning play in our lives. For example, in our time technological advancements, particularly in the area of communications and information management have changed many of long held assumptions about work, and about when and where learning can take place.

Much of work protocol has been built around the assumption that people work as individuals to contribute to a collective outcome. Further, work has been viewed as location-bound. That is to say, the "work place" has been limited to a place where work is done (a particular work station in a particular building) and within certain time boundaries. To the extent that we interact with co-workers, it is often done face-to-face or over the telephone (each at his or her assigned work station). All this has, of course, changed with the introduction of computer networks and facsimile machines. Workers may log on to a computer network to receive, process and transmit huge quantities of information without ever leaving home. Indeed, they may sign on to do a little work at odd hours and from a vacation spot or moving automobile. Co-workers may meet in "cyberspace" to discuss ideas and exchange information, they may leave messages, graphic or text data in electronic "mail boxes" to be retrieved by any number of colleagues at any time.

These new capabilities affect work-related learning as well as the way we work. For example, consider Houle's (1961) learner-orientation categories, discussed earlier. Will activity-oriented learners, defined by Houle as seeking social interaction, find the interaction of the internet sufficient to their needs? Some have conjectured that the relative anonymity of the internet has actually relieved some of the constraints of face-to-face interaction. Others have noted that the protocol for verbal interaction is quite different on the internet because the visual or voice tone cues on which we have come to rely for feedback, are not available. Many people who are quite loquacious in person or over the telephone, are virtually speechless on the internet, at least for the present, because their poor typing skills limit their ability to contribute to the conversation. All of this also affects the value and mechanisms of collaborative and individual work.

Just as work itself has been affected, so has work-related learning. Many have already had to learn to work with a new software package. Word processing has almost entirely replaced type writing. Getting on and off the electronic mail system or bulletin board is now a fundamental survival skill in most offices. But the variety and volume of information available through the integrated databases of the world-wide web, the capacity to "meet and chat" with human resources, and the ability to conduct such activities from anywhere on or close to the face of the Earth, has moved us much closer to the day when neither work nor work-related learning will be location bound. How we cope with these issues as individuals and as groups of workers, how our employers value and respond to these new opportunities will most assuredly become a key reference point in understanding adult learning at the turn of the 21st century.

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